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REVIEW & OUTLOOK (U.S.)

A President's Credibility

Trump's falsehoods are eroding public trust, at home and abroad.



President Donald Trump in the Oval Office, March 21. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

March 21, 2017 7:28 p.m. ET

If President Trump announces that North Korea launched a missile that landed within 100 miles of Hawaii, would most Americans believe him? Would the rest of the world? We're not sure, which speaks to the damage that Mr. Trump is doing to his Presidency

with his seemingly endless stream of exaggerations, evidence-free accusations, implausible denials and other falsehoods.

The latest example is Mr. Trump's refusal to back off his Saturday morning tweet of three weeks ago that he had "found out that [Barack] Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory" on Election Day. He has offered no evidence for his claim, and a parade of intelligence officials, senior Republicans and Democrats have since said they have seen no such evidence.

Yet the President clings to his assertion like a drunk to an empty gin bottle, rolling out his press spokesman to make more dubious claims. Sean Spicer —who doesn't deserve this treatment—was dispatched last week to repeat an assertion by a Fox News commentator that perhaps the Obama Administration had subcontracted the wiretap to British intelligence.

That bungle led to a public denial from the British Government Communications Headquarters, and British news reports said the U.S. apologized. But then the White House claimed there was no apology. For the sake of grasping for any evidence to back up his original tweet, and the sin of pride in not admitting error, Mr. Trump had his spokesman repeat an unchecked TV claim that insulted an ally.

The wiretap tweet is also costing Mr. Trump politically as he hands his opponents a sword. Mr. Trump has a legitimate question about why the U.S. was listening to his former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, and who leaked news of his meeting with the Russian ambassador. But that question never gets a hearing because the near-daily repudiation of his false tweet is a bigger media story.

FBI director James Comey also took revenge on Monday by joining the queue of those saying the bureau has no evidence to back up the wiretap tweet. Mr. Comey even took the unusual step of confirming that the FBI is investigating ties between the Trump election campaign and Russia.

Mr. Comey said he could make such a public admission only in “unusual circumstances,” but why now? Could the wiretap tweet have made Mr. Comey angry because it implied the FBI was involved in illegal surveillance? Mr. Trump blundered in keeping Mr. Comey in the job after the election, but now the President can’t fire the man leading an investigation into his campaign even if he wants to.

All of this continues the pattern from the campaign that Mr. Trump is his own worst political enemy. He survived his many false claims as a candidate because his core supporters treated it as mere hyperbole and his opponent was untrustworthy Hillary Clinton. But now he’s President, and he needs support beyond the Breitbart cheering section that will excuse anything. As he is learning with the health-care bill, Mr. Trump needs partners in his own party to pass his agenda. He also needs friends abroad who are willing to trust him when he asks for support, not least in a crisis.

This week should be dominated by the smooth political sailing for Mr. Trump’s Supreme Court nominee and the progress of health-care reform on Capitol Hill. These are historic events, and success will show he can deliver on his promises. But instead the week has been dominated by the news that he was repudiated by his own FBI director.

Two months into his Presidency, Gallup has Mr. Trump’s approval rating at 39%. No doubt Mr. Trump considers that fake news, but if he doesn’t show more respect for the truth most Americans may conclude he’s a fake President.

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